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ABSTRACT

This paper describes four considerations for policymakers who wish to have public schools serve as viable partners in the rural development efforts of their communities. First, schools are a community resource. When rural students are given opportunities to engage in community-based learning, they develop responsible citizenship and leadership skills, increasing the community's social capital. Sustaining such opportunities requires the support of the local community and public policy. Second, how policymakers value rural places impacts how they think about and measure educational success. Our country seems to have forgotten that the top priority of schools is to serve the public good. Meanwhile, the chase for individual profit is depleting community after community as schools educate students to participate anywhere in the global economy, forgetting that "anywhere" usually means "elsewhere." Third, policymakers must understand rural development, strategies, and trends. Old sources of rural comparative advantage, such as cheap land and labor, are being replaced by quality of life; accountability for public tax dollars constrains the creation of large new rural programs; telecommunications can overcome geographic isolation; and small rural communities need to form new cooperative political units for education, service delivery, and public entrepreneurship. Finally, policymakers should study successful examples of rural school-community development partnerships to see which policy actions can replicate them. (Contains 26 references.) (TD)

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

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Public Schools as Partners in Rural Development: Considerations for Policymakers

The rural segment of American schooling is significant, making up almost two-thirds of the more than 14,000 school districts in the U.S. in 1997-98. These are schools located in rural or small town locales. And some of these rural schools are located in "urban" school districts.[1] Can public schools be part of the solution in helping rural communities transition into a highly technological, global-oriented and information-based society? Have educational policymakers considered issues that might enable public schools to be viable partners in meeting rural development needs?

Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley recently asked the nation to follow the example and leadership of rural communities in resisting the trend toward separation of schools from communities. He challenged rural communities to lead by example in the battle to make schools the centers of community.[2] Accepting this challenge would respond to those who insist that public schools must enable each student to learn to live well as productive citizens in a rural or urban place while also serving community needs.[3] Accepting the challenge also means policymakers must develop a better understanding of the circumstances confronting rural schools in the larger context of its community—and develop policies that invigorate the role of public schools as partners in rural development.

In its third and final report to President Clinton entitled *Towards a Sustainable America*,[4] The President's Council on Sustainable Development recommended 140 actions that would improve the economy, protect the environment, and improve our quality of life. Developing local capacity and partnerships is one of the three types of tools the Council recommended as critical for overcoming major obstacles to creating sustainable rural communities. This paper describes four considerations for policymakers who wish to have public schools serve as viable partners in rural development efforts of their communities: (1) valuing schools as a community resource; (2) valuing rural America; (3) understanding rural development, strategies, and trends; and (4) building rural-appropriate models. It concludes with some questions that illustrate actions needed by policymakers to advance the legitimate role of public schools in rural development.

Consideration #1: Valuing Schools as a Community Resource

Policymakers will need to consider if policy should give public schools a more formal role in the community, beyond calls for parent and community involvement that is primarily associated with getting all students to master core academic standards and pass related tests. Advocating survival and revitalization of rural areas by building and sustaining strong linkages with local public schools is not a new idea. Many rural advocates have promoted the need for schools to "reform" in ways that build on the central role schools must play in the life of communities, as well as the individual student, if it is to be a viable institution.[5] Otherwise, well-meaning educational reform initiatives have limited chance for success, particularly if the reform is to be sustainable. Thinking globally and acting locally in ways that value rural places is not easy in a policy environment that seldom views community development as a traditional or essential role of "schooling." Kretzmann and McKnight remind us:

> As schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many rural and urban communities have lost their power as a valuable community resource. And many economically distressed towns, communities, and neighborhoods have begun to struggle toward economic revitalization without the valuable contributions of the local schools.[6]

Working in partnership with local leaders, rural schools can have a positive impact on community viability, particularly when students are given opportunities to engage in community-based (place-based) learning. While building the social capital of the school and youth, these experiences also help youth develop responsible citizenship skills and provide opportunities for tomorrow's leaders to emerge. Sustaining such opportunities requires the support of the local community and policy. Policy provides the basis upon which a program can sustain support over time.[7]

Consideration #2: Valuing Rural America

If educational policymakers are to address school reform consistent with a community-building role, how one values rural areas as a place is critical to policy decisions. For example, both pro-rural and anti-urban values are persistent and powerful in American myth, reality, and political and social discourse:

> For many people, rurality connotes intrinsic value. That value can be positive, as expressed by such rural descriptions as pastoral, bucolic, and untamed. It can be negative, as in desolate, backward, and isolated. These values have developed throughout the nation's history and are expressed in its literature, art, music, popular culture, political opinion, and residential preferences. Furthermore, Americans value rurality for what it is, what it is not, and what they believe it is or is not.[8]

How one values rural places may impact how one thinks about and measures the success of schooling. Haas and Nachtigal contend our country tends to measure education success by individual profit, having forgotten that the top priority of schools is to serve the public good. The philosophy of *living well* is most closely associated with the American rural way of life, a life characterized by production and sufficiency. But the chase for the *good life is* depleting community after community. Rural schools have contributed to this process by educating students to take their places anywhere in the global economy—and ignore the fact that *anywhere* usually means *elsewhere*.[9]

According to the Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development[10], rural America--rich in its ecological and cultural diversity--occupies more than 80 percent of the nation's landmass, and accounts for a fifth of its population. The size and complexity of rural America make it difficult to generalize about its problems or assets, though some common characteristics exist. For much of their existence, rural communities have relied on the wealth of natural resources found in the landscape. But in the 20th Century great changes—technological, political and economic—have brought a profound transformation to agriculture and other renewable resource industries and to the rural communities dependent on them.

For rural America, the rapid pace of change brings with it not only challenges but opportunities as well. In some ways, sustainable development aims to manage change that is inevitable, and to do it in ways that are economically sound, environmentally responsible and socially equitable. The most successful communities strive to build on local assets and abilities while adopting and adapting new ideas and technologies to the local context.

In the book, *Rural Development in the United States: Connecting Theory, Practice, and Possibilities*, the authors [11] give meaning to rural places. They contend rural places are ideally defined by three fundamental characteristics. First, there is a *relation to nature,* in which human use of natural objects and processes is guided by notions of balance, affection, and care. Human use of earth, water and resources is shaped by the knowledge of their limitations and need to ensure continued existence over time. In essence, humans function as stewards of the place.

Second, is a *relation to other human beings.* Individuals and families come to know one another intimately, assist one another in time of need, and trust one another enough to cooperate in pursuit of goals that cannot be achieved alone.

The third characteristic is a *relation to history*. Rural places enjoy a special stability over time. Individuals are linked to their place, and to each other, by narratives of family and community. Memories and a sense of place are shared from one generation to the next. People see their place of residence as more than a temporary stopping point while in transit or in migration to yet another residence. Children take their parents place in the community, as many live and die where they were born.

While many exceptions exist to these special relations appropriately considered "rural ideology," they help clarify the conflict between market- and place-oriented rural development. Markets prize innovation, require mobility, and act as a solvent on established social relations. For example, should rural communities welcome WalMarts, which offers a wider range of goods at lower prices, if their arrival means the death-knell of businesses on Main Street. Unfettered market processes are likely to erode the stability and integrity of many local communities, but American culture rewards individualism and mobility, not place. In essence, the devaluing of place brings with it a loss of belonging.[12] Some researchers note that it is a lack of belonging that also contributes to the rising violence in our schools.

Consideration #3: Understanding Rural Development, Strategies and Trends

If policymakers are to enable public schools to be viable partners with their communities in ways that value place and the individual student, an understanding of rural development and related strategies and trends is essential. Otherwise, to create educational reform policies that imply the school is preparing students to be successful in a global economy may or may not garner the support of local taxpayers, community leaders, and parents.[13]

In their book, *Rural Development Strategies*[14], Sears and Reid maintain that, generally speaking, in the policy context "*rural*" is regarded as including small towns as well as open country areas. Among government programs, "*small*" usually includes villages, small towns, and smaller cities. *"Development"* should not be used interchangeably with "growth," which refers to the expansion of total economic activity within an area. Programs to stimulate growth usually focus on the number of jobs created in the short-term. "Development," in contrast to growth, refers to fundamental and sustainable increases in productivity of individuals and institutions, leading to higher per capita incomes for individuals. It may include growth, but not necessarily. For example, the goal may be to create better jobs, rather than more jobs. Development programs focus on changing underlying conditions and require investments in institutions, facilities, and people.

A rural development strategy is a carefully crafted and orchestrated set of tactics that are intended, as a package, to move a rural community or region in the direction of a specific development goal. Upgrading the quality of the local K-12 school system is considered a rural development tactic, just as is providing technical assistance to a small business in the community. This package of tactics is likely to include some that are implemented simultaneously and some that are implemented sequentially."[15]

Elements contributing to successful local development are unpredictable from one locale to another. Some of the reasons include: (1) the great differences between communities in resources and location attributes; (2) the degree to which regional, national, and international economic forces influence what happens locally and the limited span of control any locale has over those forces; (3) lack of understanding of the major elements that give rise to local economic success; (4) lack of much theoretical insight into the same issues; and (5) the rather consistent evidence that when successful development in rural communities does occur, it frequently depends on the special initiatives, local attitudes, or leadership and actions of some individual(s) who prove all experts wrong.[16]

Policymakers should develop policies that best position the public school to add value in the context of significant rural development trends. Gaston and Baehler[17] offer five such trends. First, pressures of international competition are forcing steady productivity increases in agriculture, natural resources, and manufacturing, expanding output with fewer employment

opportunities for rural residents. Any hope of maintaining, let alone expanding, the rural job base, is requiring local, state and national rural development policy to turn increasingly toward other sectors of the economy (i.e., retiring elderly, tourism, government activities). This new emphasis is consistent with the shift from the traditional comparative advantages of rural areas—available natural resources and low production costs—to an emphasis on amenities. Importing people and dollars, with less emphasis on exporting raw materials and manufacture goods, reflects the transitions underway in many rural economies. Some people and dollars come for short-term visits (e.g., tourists); others come to set up residency (e.g., migrating retirees, government facilities). Old sources of rural comparative advantage (i.e., cheap land and low-wage labor) are being replaced by a new incentive in rural America—quality of life.

Second, every level of the federal government now recognizes the fiscal constraints and accountability for public tax dollars that make almost impossible the creation of large new rural programs. Continuing pressure on existing programs is inevitable. Government programs must increasingly employ cost-effective, non-bureaucratic mechanisms, and they must use public resources to catalyze action in the private sector and in rural communities. In essence, contemporary government can steer the boat, but it can't row.

Third, the importance of rural areas being adjacent to thriving metropolitan areas for economic development reasons means that efforts must be intensified to find effective ways to overcome the geographical disadvantage of distance from urban areas. Rural policy must focus on advanced telecommunications that could give rural communities more complete, timely access to information, and it must lower existing barriers to fuller rural participation in the most vigorously growing parts of the economy.

Fourth, the emerging importance of size for community survival suggests that institutional change is essential. Small rural communities must seek to break down political boundaries and form new cooperative political units for education, service delivery, and public entrepreneurship—units that more closely correspond to the real scope of the contemporary rural economic and social life. Recent trends suggest that only through such cooperation can many of the smaller communities hope to avoid continuing decline and eventual extinction.

Fifth, many analysts conclude that the real sources of the "wealth of nations" in the 21st century are the skills and cumulative leaning of the workforce—the new keys to competitiveness. Many reasons exist for local communities and state and federal governments to embark on a new partnership to upgrade education and training. But rural communities should be under no illusion that such initiatives by themselves will suffice to create local job opportunities and prevent the outflow of young people. What enhances national wealth will not necessarily benefit particular regions.

The gap between rural and urban education/training levels is frequently regarded as a source of rural disadvantage.[18] One major comprehensive study, however, rejects the thesis that low rural skills are a cause of rural economic misfortune and that increased rural education and

training would serve as a cure. The reason is interregional leakage resulting from population mobility. "While raising individual education levels improves individual opportunities, and raising the nation's education level should make us more competitive internationally, there is little evidence that raising local education levels is in itself a key to rural employment growth."[19]

Consequently, policies should encourage schools as partners in rural development strategies that attempt to address common weaknesses in a shifting rural economy. Rural America is weakest in those areas of economic activity generally considered most vital to national competitiveness: product innovation, management innovation, information development, high value-added services and production, and technical knowledge.[20]

A key issue for rural areas is whether they can learn to do a better job of implementing innovation developed elsewhere, in a manner that creates new rural employment possibilities for workers displaced by technological change. A possible niche for rural areas may be in incremental innovation, in essence supporting the continuous improvement of existing products and services.[21] Successful rural development requires the ability to see advantages where others see only liabilities. Thus, community mobilization and visionary public entrepreneurship are also likely keys to successful rural development.[22]

As the centers of community advocated by Secretary of Education Richard Riley, rural schools--with employees among the best educated in the community and an army of energetic youth--have an opportunity (and obligation) to serve as a conduit for both mobilizing and leading significant community-building initiatives. Continuous improvement of rural schools based solely on student achievement on "standards-based" tests may fall far short of the policies needed for schools to be perceived as an effective partner in implementing desired rural development strategies. And, as researchers in Arizona note, public education policy in a state must not ignore social equality issues, such as the need to concentrate resources in the rural communities where educational and economic needs are proportionately greater:

> Reforming schools in rural areas without focusing equal attention on economic development will only exacerbate the 'brain drain' whereby the brightest students leave to seek education and employment in urban areas. On the other hand, establishing high performance workplaces in rural areas without a skilled labor force is imprudent. State policies are needed that proactively help rural areas out of the Catch-22 in which they are trapped, i.e., needing a skilled workforce to foster economic growth and needing businesses and industry in order to foster the education and training of a skilled workforce. To fail to create such policies is to accept the fact that rural areas will continue to be plagued by unemployment, poverty, and their social consequences.[23]

Consideration #4: Building Partnership Models

Across rural America, some public schools are seeking to serve the rural development

needs of their communities. More often than not, these efforts exist because of the unique philosophy of a particular school program or teacher (e.g., agricultural education/FFA), the commitment of a non-profit organization to the needs of rural communities (e.g., Annenberg Rural Challenge/Rural School and Community Trust), the attention of a federal agency to address problems of persistent poverty in a rural area (e.g., Appalachian Regional Commission), or other governmental agency with close ties historically to rural America (e.g., USDA/State/Local Cooperative Extensive Service). In some states, particularly if it is one of the 37 with a state rural development council, collaboration may be encouraged among several entities in the public and private sectors to leverage resources and address needs of rural communities.

Unfortunately, a dearth of information exists regarding how these efforts have been guided or advanced by policy action, or if the school's activities are part of an intentional rural development strategy. Examples can be found of schools performing activities that could be argued as seeking to serve the rural development needs of their local community or area. Following are some examples in the AEL Region (i.e., KY, TN, VA, WV) initiated by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the Annenberg Rural Challenge (now Rural School and Community Trust), or a school's agricultural education/FFA program.

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Initiatives. The Next Generation Entrepreneurial Schools project focuses on instilling the value of entrepreneurship as a desirable and viable career option among students in Appalachian counties of Kentucky. Working first with two school districts to develop entrepreneurial problem-solving tools, the project hopes to enable school districts to help students compete in the global marketplace.

ARC also supports an entrepreneurship training pilot program in Knox, Sevier, and Blount counties in TN, where teachers are integrating entrepreneurship into the high school curriculum. An entrepreneurship summer camp is available for students who participate in the high school curriculum. The entrepreneurship camp is modeled after the Tennessee Governor=s Schools of Excellence program. Entrepreneurship courses, which involved 17 business mentors and the eventual creation of 4 new businesses, are outcomes of the program. Additionally, 27 students attended the summer School of Excellence in Entrepreneurship.

In Wise County, VA, ARC funds helped the local school board establish a computer repair and assembly program that will prepare people to become computer technicians and have entrepreneurial skills in the information systems field. The program offers courses in repair methods, ethics and technician etiquette, computer engineering, and software. Students of the program also receive entrepreneurial training to help them develop their own businesses. The program acts as a vendor to sell both units built by the students and student-provided computer repair services. All program graduates receive program support in obtaining employment in the surrounding area. A retail sales unit was established to provide service to local public agencies.

To increase entrepreneurial education opportunities in West Virginia and prepare young people to engage in entrepreneurial activities, ARC helps support an entrepreneurial camp for high school students. The 6-day residential camp includes business owners serving as resources for the economic education portion of the program. More than 100 students from distressed Appalachian counties have participated in the summer entrepreneurship camps,. More than 100 donors have provided scholarships to assist youth in attending the programs.

Rural School & Community Trust Programs. Nine elementary, seven middle, and 13 secondary schools in southeast Kentucky and southwest Virginia are involved in the work of the Appalachian Rural Education Network (AREN) supported by a grant from The Annenberg Rural Challenge, now the Rural School and Community Trust. The greatest challenge of many local communities is overcoming dependence on a dying coal industry. AREN schools are working to improve the quality of education for students in a framework that emphasizes a community-based curriculum that acknowledges the importance of place in student learning, community stewardship, and systemic change in relation to community/school culture. Within this framework, the AREN schools are guided by a commitment to improving education for students throughout the region in order to re-create viable, sustainable rural communities.

In rural eastern Tennessee seven schools, grades K-12, educators seek to embrace a pedagogy of place as a different way of thinking about teaching and learning, as they shift in instructional methodology from being text-driven and teacher-directed to being a student-driven, authentic-learning approach. Teachers are developing skills and abilities that allow them to facilitate experiential project-based and community-connected learning opportunities for students. The schools are in various stages of developing outdoor classrooms on their campuses that can be utilized by students, teachers, and the community. This cluster of schools also partners with an organization to jointly develop and publish a directory of local and regional craftspeople, folk artists, historians, and storytellers.

Nine schools and more than 2,000 students in Mineral, Hampshire, Grant, and Monroe Counties participate in the West Virginia Stewardship Collaborative. The Collaborative defines stewardship as "a quiet revolution in the way schools become centers for student-directed learning, leadership development, and integrating learning with the human and natural resources of our communities through direct community service." Goals of the Collaborative include using watersheds and their communities as the focal point in the school curriculum for providing students with community-based experiential learning; enabling all students and community stakeholders to participate in stewardship of natural and human resources to improve the environment and to enhance quality of life; and promoting and accounting for the strengthening of social and economic capital in the community.

Agricultural Education/FFA Programs. Started in the early 1970s, the National FFA Organization's *Building Our American Communities* (BOAC) program was considered an integral part of the agricultural education program in many rural high schools. Now incorporated

as part of the National FFA Chapter Award Program, many schools continue to perform community service activities that make the school a partner in local rural development efforts.

The community development focus of the National FFA Chapter Award Program is designed to encourage the local development of FFA partnerships with other groups and organizations while taking a leadership role to make the community a better place to live and work. Using state, national and international activities, a chapter and its members can serve as catalysts to improve the community's economic, environmental and human resources.[24] FFA Chapters in the AEL Region with noteworthy community development activities include Scott County and Fulton County chapters in KY; Munford and Portland chapters in TN; Laurel Park and Central chapters in VA; and Ravenswood and Ripley FFA chapters in WV.

As illustrated by these examples of public schools to be involved in rural development activities, no one best model is appropriate for all rural schools and their communities. Viable partnerships require flexibility in planning and implementing approaches that are adaptable to the capacity of each school and the community's rural development needs.

Concluding Questions for Policymakers

Issues in rural America are increasingly gaining attention. For example, reinstitution of the Rural Caucus in the U.S. Congress and the highly publicized bus tour by Secretary of Education Richard Riley to the rural Mississippi Delta illustrate the growing importance of rural areas and its people to our nation's future prosperity. Interests in sustaining school improvement gains (and community schools), as well as rural places may be at an all-time high. Calls for parent and community involvement, the school-to-work movement, [25] significant numbers of school-business partnerships, and student participation in community service as a way of developing character and civic duty skills all signal the desire for public schools to reconnect with or better serve their communities.

The considerations described in this policy brief should be valuable for policymakers seeking to encourage public schools to become significant partners in rural development. Policymakers will need to act on some important questions. For example, will what a student learns in the "community classroom" be considered worthy of academic credit and be reflected in standards for student achievement and school success?[26] Will the preparation of future teachers include experiences that value rural America as a desirable place to live and work and provide skills for teachers to make schools the centers of their communities?

Will policy incentives encourage state departments of education and state rural development councils to partner in meaningful ways for effectively meeting the needs of students and rural communities? Will community leaders consider public schools as resources for rural development during discussions of investing in "infrastructure," or see public schools as a drain on the community's resources? Can public schools partner with their communities in ways that distance learning technology located in the school is useful for helping the community overcome

the disadvantage of distance from an urban area? Will preparation of school and district leaders enable them to advocate pedagogy of place, make schools the centers of community, and engage the community in significant school improvement and recognition efforts? Will community members, parents, and students be allowed to provide labor in constructing or renovating school facilities, thus saving their "community school" and taxpayers significant amounts of money? Will federal and state policy support research and development efforts that seek to develop adaptable models of rural school improvement, particularly those reinforcing the necessary role of schools in rural development?

Sustaining the rural school and community in mutually beneficial ways is not a new idea. But getting all schools to be genuine partners in rural development, while expecting them to be accountable primarily for all students doing well on a test is a new and difficult context for creating the "community school." Such a context will require new thinking and innovative action by policymakers as we enter the new millennium.

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